

# The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those  
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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## A LINK IN THE CHAIN

A young South Sea Island savage strays from his tribe and is attacked by a head-hunter from an enemy race. In the battle he is completely disarmed. He stands defenseless before his enemy, who is about to sink a spear into him, when a meteor falls from the sky, crushing the head-hunter and unexpectedly saving the life of the young savage.

**T**HIS synopsis was submitted in response to the invitation in last month's Student-Writer for plot outlines or brief stories which might be discussed and criticized through the columns of the publication. The author accompanied his plot outline by the statement that an editor had characterized the completed story as "vivid in atmosphere and descriptive quality, but too dependent upon coincidence."

"I thought," comments the writer, "that the climax had all the advantage of dramatic quality and surprise. Merely because the falling of the meteor at such a moment is a coincidence, am I barred from using it in any way? Such events have occurred in real life."

Answering the question: So far as this plot is concerned, there is little to be said in defense of the incident. Editors are accustomed to reject stories involving coincidence, and yet the device may have a legitimate use in fiction. Once the principle involved has been made clear, it will not be difficult to point out how the falling of the meteor upon the head-hunter might be correctly employed.

As it stands, the falling of the meteor lacks significance. It seemingly indicates paucity of invention on the author's part. When such events happen in real life, we see the hand of providence back of them; but when they occur in fiction, we see only the hand of the author. It is too easy to write a story in which the hero is saved by a bolt from the blue or other extraneous happening.

All of which brings us to a discussion of what is termed motivation in fiction.

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The development of a well-worked-out story is a demonstration of cause and effect. The reader is made to feel not only that the incidents did occur but that they were practically inevitable. Consciously or unconsciously, we look for motives and reasons behind every occurrence. Much of the satisfaction we gain from reading stories and novels comes through the insight the reading gives us into such motives and reasons. When a crime is committed, the detectives employed upon it know that it was more than a random occurrence. It had a cause—a reason. It did not merely “happen” that John Jones was attacked by another man. The first question asked in such an event is, “What was the motive?”

Perhaps the attacker needed money. Robbery, then, was the motive. Perhaps the two had a dispute, in which case punishment or anger caused the deed. Going back of this, we should find that the dispute had a cause, and so on—an endless chain of causes and effects.

The plot of a well-constructed story may be likened to the shot of a skillful billiard-player. At the beginning, the balls are placed in a certain situation—corresponding to the opening situation occupied by the characters. The cue in the hand of the player is given a certain impetus—corresponding to the incident which forms the inciting motive of the action in the story. This sets the balls in motion, and as one impinges upon the other it forms the “motive” for its activity. The resulting situation of the balls, when they have come to a rest, is practically what the player planned when he gave that carefully shaded opening impulse.

The motivation of a piece of fiction is the series of causes and effects resulting in the climax. A does something to B which causes B to do something to C, and C, in turn, passes on the impulse in changed form when he comes in contact with A.

Unless the causal relation between incidents in a story is distinct, the narrative will fail to pass muster on the score of construction. To introduce chance or coincidence into the climax is as weakening as it would be for a billiard-player to put his hand on the table after a shot and bring the balls forcibly into the position he desired.

The principle can be exemplified conveniently by the plots used illustratively in the May and June issues of the Student-Writer. The first of these, “The Derelict,” by Albert Payson Terhune, consists of the following chain of causes and effects:

Original cause—Jack Barret is led astray by his companion, Philip Venable. This results in his punishment and reduction to the status of a jailbird, causing him to nurse a desire for revenge against Venable, who in time has become a respected member of the bench. Years later Jack’s desire results in a nocturnal visit, when he works

out a unique scheme of vengeance, which leads to the utter demoralization of Judge Venable.

Although the actual story begins with the nocturnal visit, note that the real beginning of the cause-and-effect chain occurred sometime in the past and is brought out by means of retrospect. Note also that the final incident, the punishment of Venable, is the direct and almost inevitable consequence of his youthful escapade. It never would have occurred but for this original impulse.

In the second illustration employed in the former article, the "causal incident" was the father's ultimatum to Jack that his allowance would stop unless he earned \$1,000 in three months. This caused Jack to make a deal with Link Spivins, whereby he was to introduce the latter into society. The outcome of the deal was the introduction of Spivins to Jack's Aunt Lucia, which, in turn, resulted in her elopement with Spivins. The result of this was to make Jack's father wrathful toward him, but also to put him in a position where he was forced to admit that his son had met his conditions.

In the story outlined at the beginning of this discussion, the falling of the meteor at the precise moment and on the exact spot occupied by the head-hunter is pure coincidence. It is not and could not have been the result of any causes set in motion in the story. Since there is no connection, through cause and effect, between the meteor's falling and the rest of the action, it is not a legitimate factor in the story.

Yet there is a possible right method of employing the incident—there is a legitimate use of coincidence in fiction. The only requirement is that it shall form a link in the chain of cause and effect.

Now, it is certain that it cannot serve as an *effect*. Should it do so, it would cease to be a coincidence, for a coincidence implies lack of casual connection between two factors. If I should make an engagement to meet a friend at the station just as the clock pointed to half-past two, the meeting would not be a coincidence, but a result of the engagement. But if I should be at the station at that hour, not knowing that my friend was coming, and he should be there, not knowing that I was coming, our meeting would be a coincidence. Therefore, we may assert that coincidence can never be employed in fiction as an effect.

But how about employing it as a *cause*? Surely it may serve as the first link in a chain of connected happenings. Thus employed, it satisfies all the requirements and becomes legitimate fiction-material.

Let us see whether the falling of the meteor on the head-hunter cannot be made to serve this purpose.

It must, as we have shown, be a cause and not an effect. Sup-

pose, therefore, that we make the story as now outlined merely the opening incident. The young savage strays from his band and is saved from his enemy by the meteor, as described.

The natural result of this occurrence is that, filled with awe by the seeming miracle, the savage jumps at the conclusion that he is particularly favored by the higher powers—that he bears a charmed life. Heretofore, we will say, he has been of a timid, shrinking disposition. Now, believing himself under supernatural protection, he returns to his band and surprises the other members of his tribe by a new air of arrogance. He has long coveted in secret the daughter of the chief, but feared to contend for her with his hot-headed rivals. Now he claims her as his own, challenges the young warriors who oppose him to mortal combat, and—upheld by his belief in his own invulnerability—comes out victor in the contests. He quickly rises to a high place in the esteem of the tribe and, growing more ambitious, eventually overthrows the chief, reigning in his place. All this results directly from the coincidence of the falling meteor.

No one can find fault with this use of coincidence, since it falls naturally into place as a link in the chain of cause and effect which makes the story significant.

The lesson to be gained from this plot outline and its reconstruction is capable of wide application. The situation, for example, could be transposed to a modern setting. Imagine the hero a young business man whose timorous disposition has stood in the way of his advancement. He holds an unimportant position at a small salary because he has feared to tempt his fate by applying for advancement.

One day, impelled by a pressing need for more money, he takes a desperate chance and ventures his savings in a wild speculation. Too late, he learns that the stock he purchased is worthless—that he has practically thrown his money away. But overnight the stock takes a sudden turn. It becomes unexpectedly valuable and the young man cashes in at a handsome profit.

His friends, in congratulating him, declare, "There's no keeping a man down who could win out in a deal like that. You must have been born lucky."

All day and the following night these phrases run through the young man's mind. He is so overwhelmed by his lucky strike that he comes to believe himself especially favored by the fates. The next day he puts the matter to a test by demanding a better position. His employers had been ready to drop him altogether from the payroll, but his newly acquired air of confidence impresses them with the idea that, after all, he is too good a man to lose. He gets the promotion.

Embodened by his success, he sets out to win the daughter of his employer, whom he has long admired at a distance. Sustained by his belief that he was born lucky, he succeeds; and eventually he steps into her father's shoes—all as a result of the lucky coincidence which served as the initial link in the chain.

The theme might be transposed into a college athletic story, a pure love-story, a story of social aspirations, a war-story, or a tale of some other type. All of which should suffice to convince the writer that there are both legitimate and illegitimate uses of coincidence. Any confusion on the subject may be cleared away if it is remembered that each major incident in the tale should be connected with all the others by a causal relationship—it must be either the cause or the effect of other circumstances involved. *W. E. H.*

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## THE WRITERS' FORUM

**A**MONG the comments that reached The Student-Writer workshop bearing upon the subject of last month's leading article, the following are chosen as among the more interesting and suggestive. Readers who have thoughts to express upon topics discussed in the publication, or other matters of interest to writers, are invited to send them in. As space permits, they will be published from time to time, provided they seem helpful or of general interest.

\* \* \* \*

**Pearl Riggs Crouch writes:**

"The Ring of Truth," which appears in your July number, clears up admirably the perplexing experience problem of the writer.

It seems to me that the basic idea entertained by the divinity student in "The Way of All Flesh" is crude. It presents a phase of sophistry which humanity has happily outgrown.

How simple and logical is your conception—that through imaginative sympathy we may re-create an emotion! Your interpretation appeals to the writer who believes that sophistry in any form is an indication of mental immaturity.

If it were necessary for one to live first in actuality the experiences that he portrays in order to make them ring true, would it not be incumbent on the reader to do likewise if he expects to grasp the sensations depicted? If imagination is the power that transmutes the germ of truth into a finished creation, then to experience the gamut of human emotion would never add a cubit to the stature of an unimaginative writer.

As to whether a man is qualified to write from a woman's point of view, or vice versa, I should say that since there is no sex in mind the question falls naturally into the general-experience category. We have, in fact, plenty of affirmative evidence upon this point.

It is true, perhaps, that a mature person has enough material for all the tales a lifetime could compass. But that is only a part of the truth. He needs continued contact with others to verify and correct his conclusions.

\* \* \* \*

**Grace M. Ross writes:** Fannie Hurst went into department stores incognito and worked—you know her success. Molly Elliott Sewall wrote French and Parisian stories before she had ever been on French soil, messed it, I think, but she got the checks. Marah Ellis Ryan wrote stories of the Northwest, never having seen the country, made awful breaks, but got the checks. Your friend and admirer, Frank Davis, more correctly written J. Frank Davis, told me about an editor refusing a very good story because he made the cowboy out in Arizona get on the pony wrong. I made a mistake once about hitching up some mules, and the editor told me that if the whole story was as incorrect as that incident of mule-hitching he concluded it would then be a very unreliable story.

Jack London personally experienced the sensations and emotions about which he wrote so potently. My own darling and only true love, Guy de Maupassant, was a wonderful observer and deducer; no one could put anything over on Guy when it came to the question of the eternal female of the species, so far as she might affect him personally.

I believe that the majority of writers of the small broil keep pretty well within their own orbits of experience and emotions. The real genius understands everything and it is for him to dramatize the conditions of life and their resulting emotions.

Psychologically speaking, your article finds its genesis in that eternal question, whether knowledge is intuitional or sensational.

There are persons in whom the elements are so arranged that no emotion ever experienced in reality amounts to the imaginary one; there is a mental ecstasy so far transcending the real that this is left vapid. Max Nordau calls such types degenerates.

Take O. Henry: his persons cleverly made into flesh by the manipulation of words, he gets over about like an old-time musical fantasy. You are entertained in a very high-class way. Musical extravaganza, that's it. *La Merry Widow* and *Florodora*.

Of a sweet dramatization of very simple life I think Margaret Deland has done about the best work in our country, and she lived it and felt it.

Mr. Davis wrote a book recently called *Almanzar*, and he wrote about an element and district here that made me wonder how he knew, for I could not imagine him haunting such places for information, and he could not have had the correct knowledge unless he had covered the ground. I knew, because in that special district I own property, and I have often prowled around there at night, until the cop told me to "beat it." But I could not imagine the neat, correct Mr. Davis placing himself in any such compromising position. I didn't, of course, mix with the people, but I observed them from a safe distance.

There are certain things in human nature that I never can understand, though I could put some assumed interpretation on them and go on with an analysis from such a premise.

After I had read your article in the last *Student-Writer* I batted off the above, and then the Gulf breeze blew it on the floor, where it remained until today. This morning, being in a desperate mood, I said, "By gum, I'll send it."

\* \* \* \*

Arthur Preston Hankins writes: I liked "The Ring of Truth." Good chance, as you say, for discussion. Why don't you institute a department in which you get experiences and data from writers who really are having experiences and have something to report. I could go through my files of editorial letters and give you all kinds of information written to me personally by editors. Just a suggestion, but I'd be glad to help."

(The suggestion is gladly accepted. We are waiting now for first-class experience contributions from Mr. Hankins and from others who may think with us that such an exchange of ideas will prove helpful.)

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